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The Real President's Inauguration Address

Luke 6:17-26

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[Apparently to be seen as Luke's parallel to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, this is what is known as the Sermon on the Plain, on the level place. It is in many ways an inauguration speech, a declaration of a vision by one sent by God. Note that, in these blessings and woes, no one is being urged to do anything. You don't find the dearly beloved words 'ought' and 'should' or 'must' here. Everything is in the indicative rather than the imperative mood, a statement about what is rather than what ought to be.]

The best question for the morning is whether this passage from the Sermon on the Plain is good news or bad news? It depends on where you are seated when you hear the sermon. If you are rich, content, happy, then this sermon has some tough things to say about your future. It's not so much that God punishes people who are rich, content and well-fixed. God doesn't have to punish. Rather, it's that God's kingdom values certain lifestyles and not others. God's kingdom appears to be prejudiced, constitutionally disposed to certain sorts of people and not others. Jesus doesn't tell anyone, in this sermon, to go out and do anything. He simply announces the way things are in the kingdom of God.

The sermon is perhaps most strong in its blessings of those on the bottom. If this Sunday finds you hurting, hungry, mourning, or on the bottom, then this is your good news.

Some people think this is called the Sermon on the Plain to indicate that Jesus 'came down' to where we are, and there blessed us. The hard part is that he didn't bless all of us. He seems to have blessed those whom the world disregards, and gave 'woes' to those whom the world regards highly. As such, this appears to be a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

I can't tell you how many people have said to me, over the years, that they come to church on Sunday in order to be lifted up, to be comforted, to be inspired, to be encouraged. If the sermon doesn't do this, then there is some failure on the part of the minister, or so the view goes. It never seems to make any difference to suggest that what we do here, on Sunday mornings, is gather together to worship God, and that hearing from God who He says He is may be the most basic step in discovering how to worship.

But as I have been saying recently from this pulpit, we can so easily become entrenched in a patterned worldview, a set way of viewing reality and living our lives. The same patterns which provide stability for our lives and allow us to plan for the future so that we can care for each other in the present, also make it difficult for us to see something new and wonderful. It was the same thing for those who heard Jesus on the Sermon on the Plain. They were mostly God-fearing Jews who wanted to do the right things, to plan for their futures and to care for their families. They had community spirit. They understood that they had an obligation to do good, especially with those who were less fortunate.

So these pronouncements by Jesus were as striking to them as they are to us. They tend to go against our values. We hear with our ears these words but Jesus seems to get it wrong - his view is topsy-turvy. We know, we believe that those who are well off are well off because they work hard. We think there is no real reason for the average person to be hungry or to be poor, though we might admit that even the well to do sometimes have sorrow in their lives.

We have heard forever that God plays no favorites, that He is utterly impartial and non-discriminatory when judging people. We have heard that God's grace is extravagant, and is showered on the good and the bad. Yet, today we hear a clarification, a refinement. God may be gracious but He is discriminating. The kingdom of God must not mean a place where there are no distinctions, no notion of good. The kingdom of God must not mean a place where things are relative, a place where every person's opinion is of equal value. In the kingdom of our God, those whom the kingdoms of this world oppress and make miserable are lifted up.

All of this is to express one simple truth - in God's kingdom there is grace, but the nature of that grace is that it is tied inextricably to the Giver of the grace, and it is His character with which we have to do. As Jesus says directly through his teaching and indirectly through his parables, grace cuts both ways, implies both good news and bad news. It is grace to be told the truth, to be told the truth about God's kingdom, and by implication to be told the truth about our existence. If we accept it affirmatively, this grace becomes our salvation; if we deny it, this grace becomes judgment upon us.

There are boundaries to who we are as Christians, and as a community of people seeking to be faithful on the corner of Hemlock and Eldridge. There remains 'an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty' (G-1.0304), and the inaugural word of the Lord that comes to us on this day is of the way things *are and will be* now that the kingdom has been inaugurated. Hear again the words of the Jesus:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

Amen? Amen.

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